



Guests on the upper floors of the 15-story University Tower Hotel had to "sit it out" as a fire on the mezzanine floor filled corridors and a stairway with smoke. The Fire Department's 100-foot aerial ladders could not reach above the eighth floor.

UPI

## ARSON IN SEATTLE HOTEL

Fires on two separate floors on March 11, 1975, in Seattle's University Tower Hotel are believed to have been the work of an arsonist. An open stairway at the mezzanine level allowed smoke and fire to fill an interior exitway.

### **The Building**

The fifteen-story, octagon-shaped hotel is located at 4507 Brooklyn Avenue, Northeast, Seattle, Washington. It was built in 1932 of fire-resistive construction, with concrete columns and floors. The floors are numbered one through sixteen; there is no floor number thirteen.

This report by the NFPA Fire Analysis Department is based on information provided by the State Fire Marshal's Office and the Seattle Fire Department, whose cooperation is greatly appreciated.

The mezzanine floor is located between the first and second floors.

The building dimensions are approximately 150 feet by 150 feet. The hotel contains 155 rooms. It is sprinklered in the basement only, and has a manual alarm system throughout the building and a dry standpipe system in the northwest stairwell. There are two main stairways in the hotel; one is near the center of the building and the other, a smokeproof tower exit, is in the northwest corner of the building.

The interior or center stairway is not a continuous, enclosed means of egress. The stairs open into an approximately 12-foot-by-18-foot lounge on the mezzanine floor; from there the center stairway leads to a corridor, and then to an open stairway leading to the lobby and to the outside. There is a rated metal fire door between the lounge and the mezzanine corridor, but no



door between the lounge and interior stairway. The lounge, which is used as a smoking room by the public after meetings, contained two sofas, a portable bar, lamps, chairs, desks, and two clothes closets. The floor was covered with a shag rug that had two underlayment pads.

There are two arrangements for exit signs in the hotel: one consists of the word "Exit" printed on the exit door, with a green globe over the door; the second arrangement consists of just the word "Exit" printed on the door in small gold lettering.

The doors to the guests' rooms are covered with ½-inch gypsum wallboard on the inside to upgrade the fire-resistance rating. They are not equipped with door closers. The stairwell fire doors on each floor open into the corridor and do not latch in the closed position.

#### First Fire

On March 6, 1975, less than one week prior to the March 11 incident, a fire suspected to have been incendiary occurred in a vacant room on the ninth floor. Three separate fires were found in the room. One was under the draperies and consisted of burning paper. The other two were at each end of the bed.

Fire fighters could see smoke and flames coming out of the windows of the room as they approached the hotel. The fire was contained to the room of origin.

#### The March 11 Incident

Three separate fires, two of them in the same room, were discovered shortly after midnight on March 11, 1975. These fires are also believed to have been the work of an arsonist and are being investigated. It is theorized that the first two fires were started in a vacant room, number 1109, on the eleventh floor. A security guard had found the door to the room open at 11:30 pm and had locked the door. The room is located next to the northwest exit stairway.

The contents of the eleventh-floor room consisted of a single bed, vanity, chair, and a television set. One of the fires originated under the vanity and the other, on top of the bed.

The third fire was started in the lounge on the mezzanine floor.

The mezzanine fire was first discovered when the desk attendant and the security guard heard the crackling of the flames. Neither of them activated the fire alarm system, but the guard ran up to the mezzanine floor. When he saw the fire, he went to the fifteenth floor of the hotel (the top floor) by elevator and started to alert the occupants.

Because there was no door protecting the open in-

terior stairway off the lounge, smoke and heat filled the stairway to the fifteenth floor. A door to the northwest stairway was blocked open at the time the lounge fire occurred. This provided a supply of air that fanned the fire and created a draft in the center stairway that pulled the smoke and fire up the stairway. The pressure of the heat and fire gases forced the stairwell doors open and allowed smoke to penetrate each floor and corridor.

Two fire doors at the mezzanine level, which were activated by a smoke detector, did close during the fire. Fire doors on the seventh, ninth, and eleventh floors were reported to have been blocked open during the fire. Chairs were stored in the mezzanine corridor, and the fire door on the mezzanine was blocked open by the chairs.

The fire in the eleventh-floor guest room (1109) was confined to the room, although some smoke penetrated into the corridor.

The Fire Department, which was notified by the hotel receptionist at 12:14 am, responded with a ladder company and three engines. Another three engines and an aerial ladder truck responded when a second alarm was struck. Fire fighters extinguished the fires, using five-gallon pump cans and 1½-inch hose lines, within three to six minutes after the first company arrived.

The hotel was not fully occupied on the night of the fire; there were only about 70 guests registered. The Fire Department evacuated some of the occupants from the second through eighth floors using two 100-foot aerial ladders. Fire fighters escorted other guests on those floors down the northwest stairway, which was free of smoke. Guests above the eighth floor were beyond the reach of the ladders and stayed in their rooms throughout the fire. Many of them opened their windows for fresh air. The fire alarm system was not activated during the fire.

#### Injuries and Building Damage

No fatalities or serious injuries resulted from the fires, but several of the occupants were treated for smoke inhalation.

The contents of the lounge were almost completely consumed, and the center stairway and all corridors from the seventh to the fifteenth floors were heavily damaged by smoke. Draperies and carpeting burned readily during the fire.

The estimated loss to building and contents was \$100,000 to \$200,000. △